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# Energy Secretary Serves Under a Microscope

By [JOHN M. BRODER](#)

WASHINGTON — As a physicist, [Steven Chu](#) has seen atoms suspended in a powerful laser beam and DNA stretched out in a vacuum chamber.

But in his new job as energy secretary, Dr. Chu is observing phenomena he never saw in the science laboratory.

At a recent Senate hearing, for example, he witnessed a junior cabinet member (himself) being systematically dissected by a senior senator ([John McCain](#)).

Mr. McCain, Republican of Arizona, was unhappy when Dr. Chu affirmed the Obama administration's intention to suspend work at a planned nuclear waste site in Nevada. "What's wrong with Yucca Mountain, Dr. Chu?" he demanded repeatedly as Dr. Chu tried to explain.

"I think we can do a better job," Dr. Chu finally replied.

For a slight, soft-spoken Nobel laureate, Washington has been an initiation that he has likened to being "dumped in the deep end of the pool." Dr. Chu, 61, was chairman of Stanford's physics department and ran a national research laboratory. But in addition to being verbally slapped around by Mr. McCain, he has been forced to backtrack on some ill-informed comments about [OPEC](#) and ordered to spend quickly tens of billions of dollars in stimulus money with virtually no top-level help.

Dr. Chu is still mastering skills like ducking a tough question from a reporter and delivering the all-purpose "I'll get back to you on that."

He has admitted his naïveté on certain policy questions, like OPEC production quotas, and is still getting used to the scrutiny that comes with a cabinet job.

"I didn't appreciate how much of a public figure you become," Dr. Chu said in an interview recently in Milwaukee, where he spent the day talking to scientists about [biofuels](#) and touring a home that was being weatherized under a local program.

[President Obama](#) has assigned Dr. Chu to carry out some of his central priorities: wean America from dependence on fossil fuels, rebuild the nation's electrical grid and address the challenges of [climate change](#).

The science part of his job is the most rewarding, Dr. Chu said. On his visit to Milwaukee, he visibly brightened when one [University of Wisconsin](#) researcher told him about a local entrepreneur who was turning the waste products from cheesemaking into ethanol, which was then blended with gasoline at a nearby convenience store.

"Does he drop some off at the liquor store on his way?" Dr. Chu asked impishly.

A few hours later, wearing khakis frayed at the cuffs and brown, thick-soled professorial shoes, he dutifully traipsed through the small house that was getting new insulation and appliances to cut the owner's electric bills. When he emerged, five news cameras were set up on the lawn. But to his relief, most of the questions went to Gov. James E. Doyle of Wisconsin, who had accompanied him on the tour.

Asked later what part of his job he liked the least, Dr. Chu said: "The fact that I'm constantly being told that I have to be careful what I say to the press and in public. I can't speculate out loud anymore. Everything I say is taken with total seriousness."

Yet as he takes on one of the toughest policy and management challenges in government, Dr. Chu brings certain assets that none of his peers or predecessors have had: a [Nobel Prize](#), a YouTube following (for his lectures on climate change) and an unofficial theme song ("Dr. Wu" by [Steely Dan](#)). He is a major celebrity in Taiwan, where scientific achievement is rewarded with rock star status. He is a member of Academia Sinica, Taiwan's most distinguished scholarly society, as was his father.

Dr. Chu is struggling to get his arms around one of the most perplexing and intractable bureaucracies in Washington and to efficiently — and carefully — disperse \$39 billion in funding from the [stimulus package](#). Most of the department's top appointed positions, including deputy secretary, remain unfilled, leaving him largely reliant on career staff members to manage 114,000 employees and contractors and a budget that has more than doubled this year. The task at times appears overwhelming, and some in Washington quietly wonder if Dr. Chu is in over his head.

Karen Harbert, president of the Institute for 21st Century Energy at the United States Chamber of Commerce, praised Dr. Chu's academic credentials, calling him Mr. Science. But she suggested that the main decisions on energy and climate change policy were being made at the White House by a small team led by [Carol Browner](#), the former administrator of the [Environmental Protection Agency](#).

"Is he secretary of energy or secretary of research and development?" Ms. Harbert asked.

Dan Leistikow, the Energy Department's director of public affairs, said that Dr. Chu was a scientist, not a politician, and should be given a little time to adjust.

"A Nobel scientist is more likely to figure out Washington than a career politician is to figure out how to deal with carbon sequestration," Mr. Leistikow said.

Dr. Chu came to Washington after serving as director of the Energy Department's Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in California, a civilian research organization with 4,000 employees and a \$600 million annual budget. Before that, he was a professor and research scientist at Stanford and Bell Laboratories. He shared the 1997 Nobel in physics for his work on cooling and trapping atoms with laser light.

He comes from a family of academic overachievers. His father emigrated from China to study chemical engineering at the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#) and retired as a professor at the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn. His mother studied economics in China and at M.I.T. One brother, Gilbert, is a professor of medicine and biochemistry at Stanford; the other, Morgan, is a highly regarded intellectual property lawyer in Los Angeles. Dr. Chu once described himself as the academic black sheep of the family.

Morgan Chu said of his brother, "He's acclimating very well, all things considered." He added, "He has a wonderful set of skills for the job — an unbending respect for discovering the unvarnished truth and a willingness to challenge established dogma."

Matt Rogers, an energy expert with McKinsey & Company whom Dr. Chu brought in last month to help speed the pace of Energy Department spending, said it would be a mistake to dismiss Dr. Chu as just a science geek. "He is a kind man; he is a nice man," Mr. Rogers said. "But he is not a patient man. People are going to have to take a deep breath and realize they're going to be moving at a much quicker pace than they were used to."

Dr. Chu said he had been frustrated by the job vacancies and the glacial pace of his department. He is eager, he said, to get on with what he sees as his main task: finding and financing the scientific breakthroughs that will end the nation's dependence on carbon-based fuels and solve the climate change problem.

Borrowing an analogy from the world of physics, he said that in Washington, Newton's first law — a body in motion tends to stay in motion — does not apply. "In a bureaucracy, if you start something in motion, it either stops or gets derailed," he said. "You have to keep applying force."

He intends to keep applying that force, he said, because it could help solve the world's energy and

climate change problems.

"If we don't spend this money wisely and invest in new technology that addresses these challenges," he said, "we will have failed the country. We will have failed the world."

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